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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how parents are affected by various types of child care. Interviews were conducted with 109 mothers of children aged 2 to 3 1/2 years placed in one of three forms of substitute care arrangement (day care center, family day care and in-home care.) Most of the families were intact and middle class. The three groups of families did not differ in terms of socioeconomic status, family composition, parental or child age, reasons for day care, or maternal child-rearing values. The analysis of the interview responses revealed that parents are affected in different ways by the three care types. In general, utilizing center care appears to have the most positive effects on parents, using a babysitter in one's own home, the least. Mothers who use day care centers are most likely to report (as a result of the care experience): having become more knowledgeable as parents; feeling less harried; finding more enjoyment in parenting. They also tend to report more often that the parent-child relationship had improved. On the other hand, users of family day care are happier with the discipline their child receives and are more likely to feel that their child-rearing values are shared by the caretaker. Further study of the impact of day care arrangements on parents, and the consequent impact on the development of the child, is suggested. (Author/RH)

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How Parents May Mediate the Effect of Day Care

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Running Head: Effects of Day Care on Parents

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Abstract

Different types of day care may influence parents in different ways and therefore may have different consequences for the development of the child. Interviews were conducted with 109 mothers of 2-3 1/2 year-olds placed in one of three forms of substitute care arrangement (day care center, family day care, babysitter) in order to provide information on how parents are affected by various types of child care. Most of the families were intact and middle-class. The three groups of families did not differ in terms of SES, family composition, parental or child age, reasons for using day care, or maternal child-rearing values.

The analysis of the interview responses revealed that parents are affected in different ways by the three care types. In general, utilizing center care appears to have the most positive effects on parents, using a babysitter in one's own home, the least. Mothers who use day care centers are most likely to report: having become more knowledgeable as parents; feeling less harried; finding more enjoyment in parenting; and tend to more often report that the parent-child relationship had improved, all as a result of the care experience. On the other hand, users of family day care are happier with the discipline their child receives and are more likely to feel that their child-rearing values are shared by the caretaker.

These different patterns of effects are likely to result in different sets of outcomes for the child. Thus, the impact of day care needs to be investigated in settings beyond the immediate care environment. Further research is needed in order to more fully understand the role of the parent in mediating the effects of day care on the child.

The literature on the effects of day care on the developing child has burgeoned within the past eight years. Although most of the early studies of day care effects involved only contrasts between home-reared and day care-reared youngsters (see, for example, Caldwell, Wright, Honig & Tannebaum, 1970), researchers have more recently turned their attention away from simple home care/day care contrasts and instead, have begun to investigate differences among different types of day care environments. Increasing numbers of studies have, for example, examined differences between center day care and family day care (e.g., Golden, Rosenbluth, Gross, Policare, Freeman & Brownlee, 1978). This recognition that not all substitute care environments are likely to affect the child in similar ways should be, and has been, applauded (see, for example, Belsky and Steinberg, 1978).

When different types of day care are compared with regard to their effects on the child, differences in children's development are typically attributed to differences in the immediate environments of the care arrangements. There is usually presumed to be some direct link between the child's experiences which occur as a result of day care (e.g., increased contact with agemates, exposure to educational enrichment, daily separation from mother) and one or more changes in the child's behavior (e.g., performance on an intelligence test, reaction to separation, play behavior in a structured exploration in a new environment). Thus, for example, when center-reared children outperform family day care-reared agemates on standardized intelligence tests, this finding is likely to be explained in terms of the center's more school-like atmosphere, structured curriculum, or educational materials.

These sorts of explanations are based on the assumption that day care has a direct effect on the child. While we certainly do not wish to take an issue with this viewpoint, we do wish to suggest that an important aspect of the process through which children are affected by day care has not received sufficient attention in day care researchers. This element is the way in which children's parents are affected by placing their youngsters in day care.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) has argued that, in order to fully understand influences on the development of the child, we must carefully examine "second-order effects" --- influences which do not impinge upon the individual directly but are mediated through their effects on others. Day care provides an interesting context from which to investigate second-order effects on the child's development. For, although at first glance, children appear to be those most subject to the direct impact of this influence, the utilization of day care services undoubtedly invokes changes in the lives of the child's parents as well. If day care does indeed have a significant effect on the child, it may well operate through its effects on the youngster's parents.

If parents' child-rearing attitudes or behaviors are modified as a result of utilizing a substitute child care arrangment, children may be affected not solely because of their actual day care experiences, but also because of changes taking place at home. Different types of day care may affect youngsters differently because of their different effects on the child-rearing attitudes and behaviors of the children's parents. The present investigation examined how parents are differentially affected by three varieties of day care: center day care, family day care and in-home day care.

Method

Subject recruitment and selection. Mothers of young children who had someone other than themselves or their husbands care for their children for most of the day were sought. We were interested in interviewing mothers who resided in Orange County, California; had a child between the ages of 2 and 1/2 years; and employed some form of substitute care for at least 15 hours per week. The child could be cared for in any type of arrangement, including day care centers, pre-schools, nursery schools, family day care, or in-home care by a friend, babysitter, or relative. Names of potential interviewees were obtained from care providers, pediatricians, day care referral agencies, and through word-of-mouth and advertisements.

A letter describing the study and asking for assistance was mailed to each mother and a follow-up telephone call was made one week after each letter was mailed to answer questions about the study and to determine whether the respondent was willing to be interviewed. Three quarters of those parents whom we contacted agreed to be interviewed. Response rates did not vary as a function of the type of day care utilized.

Procedure. Eight undergraduate interviewers were trained in interviewing skills and in the specific use of the instrument designed for this study. All interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes. It was explained that we were interested in learning more about what it is like to a parent of a young child in Orange County.

The interview consisted of a series of structured, open-ended questions dealing with various aspects of day care use, and took approxi-

mately 45 minutes to administer.[1] Responses were recorded in long-hand for the first 50 interviews. In subsequent interviews, the interviewers utilized a coding system developed through an analysis of the first 50 interviews in conjunction with recording most of the answers in long-hand.

Sample Characteristics. The final sample consisted of 109 mothers, 52 (48%) of whom were using center day care at the time of the study; 38 (35%), family day care; and 19 (17%), in-home care. The average arrangement was used for 31 hours each week (s.d.=10.3) and had been utilized for 13 months (s.d.=10.1).

The average age of the child enrolled in the various care arrangements was 34 months; 56% of the children were male. On the whole, our sample consisted primarily of young families: two-thirds of the children were first-borns and only 30% had younger siblings; the mothers averaged 29 years of age, the fathers, 32. The majority of the families were middle-class (83%) (based on a modified three point index of parental occupation [professional, white-collar, and blue-collar]), and intact (78%).

Results

There were no significant differences among the three groups of parents with respect to either mother's or father's age, level of education, employment status, or occupation. (This is consistent with previous work indicating that a family's income has little effect on the type of child care employed [Hill, 1978]). The groups did not differ with respect to family size or family structure either. Furthermore, there were no significant differences among the three groups in terms of

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[1]A copy of the interview instrument is available from the authors.

their reasons for using day care or in terms of goals the mothers held for the rearing of their children. Thus, even though the sample was not selected entirely randomly, it is unlikely that any differences among the groups in their perceptions of how using day care affected them are due to differences among them independent of their day care experiences.

Users of in-home day care feel the greatest degree of control over what goes on in their child's care environment ($\underline{X}^2=10.4$, $\underline{p}<.05$). Furthermore, these parents, as opposed to center users and family day care users, most often feel that their opinions are listened to and respected by the care provider ($\underline{X}^2=29.8$, $\underline{p}<.001$). These findings are not surprising, since these parents also have the greatest deal of contact with their care providers ($\underline{X}^2=37.4$, $\underline{p}<.001$).

Family day care users, however, report the greatest deal of congruence between their child rearing values and those of the caregiver ($\underline{X}^2=12.1$, $\underline{p}<.01$). Consistent with this, they are the happiest of the three groups with the discipline their child receives in day care ($\underline{X}^2=13.9$, $\underline{p}<.01$). It is interesting to note in this regard, that even though the in-home day care users feel most in control, they are not the happiest with what goes on in the day care environment. This might reflect differences in the processes through which in-home care users and family day care users select care arrangements. In-home day care is chosen because of a parent's desire to have her child reared in her own home; family day care tends to be selected because of characteristics of the care provider. Thus, while in-house care users appear to look for <u>substitute</u> caregivers, family day care users seem to desire care providers who offer something special or unique.

But it is the users of center day care for whom the care experience appears to have the greatest impact outside the day care setting. In general, utilizing center day care seems to have more positive effects on parents than does employing either family day care on in-home day care. Specifically, parents using center day care were most likely to feel that they had learned more about child-rearing as a result of using day care (z^2=14.4, p<.001)[2], that using day care had improved their relationship with their child (z^2=1.2, p<.13)[2], that day care had helped them to enjoy parenting more (z^2=2.7, p<.05)[2], and that using day care had made them feel less harried (X^2=13.3, p<.05). As one parent explained, "although the quantity of time we [my child and I] spend together was decreased, the quality has increased."

Users of family day care and in-home day care alike are less likely to respond so positively when asked how using day care had affected them. It is not so much that these parents have been negatively affected by using day care as it is that they appear to generally untouched - as individuals, as spouses or as parents - by the experience. This is despite the fact that users of family day care and in-home care have significantly more personal contact with their care providers than do center users. But ironically, it may be the quality, and not the quantity, of this contact that is critical.

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[2]Only the comparision between the center care and family day care groups reached significance.

Discussion

If we are to ever understand how daycare affects children, we must pay more attention to how examine how day care affects families. We must learn more about how day care affects parenting practices, how it affects family economics, how it affects the well-being of mothers and fathers, and most importantly, how using day care affects a family's ability and willingness to function as a family. Even a youngster who spends 30 hours each week in day care still spends one hundred and 30 hours each week outside of day care. If using day care influences what takes place during those 130 hours outside of day care, we ought to know more about the nature of that influence.

Furthermore, the indirect effects of day care on the child - those mediated through the child's parents - are likely to vary as a function of the type of day care in question, just as the direct effects vary with care type. It is important, of course, to demonstrate this in a national, random sample of day care users. Nonetheless, the results of this study suggest that, at the very least, how different types of day care differentially affect parents is an issue deserving of more systematic empirical attention. Future investigations of the effects of day care on parents must not only take into account variations in day care environment but also how these variations may interact with characteristics of users in producing changes in parents' attitudes or behaviors.

Although the linkages between the effects of day care on parents and their consequent impacts on the development of the child have yet to be established, many of the reported effects of day care on the child may be better explained in terms of changes in parental attitudes or behaviors resulting from using day care than in terms of variations in

the child's experiences due to differences in care environments. Fowler and Khan (1974, 1975) for example, in their study of the intellectual development of home-reared and day care-reared youngsters, report that the IQ scores of center-reared youngsters rise soon after enrollment in day care but that the gains "wash out" after some time in the program. Interestingly, when this researcher graphed indices of mothers' interest in their child's development over a period of time corresponding to the period during which the youngsters were enrolled in the day care center, the pattern of change in this variable paralleled that of the pattern of change in IQ. At first, maternal interest increased over time (as did child IQ); subsequently, maternal interest waned, and IQ scores declined. Although data are not provided which would allow one to determine whether there existed a causal relationship between maternal interest and IQ in this study, one can not help but wonder if it was not day care experience per se but rather, changes in maternal interest, that accounted for changes in youngsters' IQ scores.

Along a similar vein, one of the findings reported in the report of the New York City Infant Day Care Study (Golden et.al., 1978) is that youngsters reared in day care centers outperform children reared in family day care homes on standardized tests of cognitive development. Although one would expect that differences in the day care environments would account for the test score differences, the researchers report that the day care centers and family day care homes they studied did not differ in terms of the amounts of social and intellectual stimulation present for the youngsters. What then, could account for the test score difference?

While a number of plausible explanations can be offered, it is worth considering for a moment one which involves the day care youngsters' parents. Suppose it were the case that the parents of the center day care children learned more about child-rearing, came to enjoy parenting more, or came to feel more relaxed than did the parents of the family day care children. Could this not ultimately affect the cognitive development of their children?

In point of fact, we would argue that if using day care actually does produce more knowledgeable or happier parents, this would have a more enduring impact on the child's cognitive development (see also Bronfenbrenner 1974, in this regard) than would what goes on in the immediate day care environment. And as long as we continue to assess the impact of day care only within the boundaries of the day care environment itself, we may be missing an important part of the picture.

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